

Steps to Self Sufficiency - Editorial

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Editor

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PASSAIC COUNTY -- With an estimated 1,300 homeless people, Passaic County is one of four counties selected by the State of New Jersey and the Corporation for Supportive Housing to set up a pilot program aimed at helping the 349 chronically homeless become self sufficient.

County homeless organizations were awarded \$2.5 million in federal grants to pay for programs to provide permanent and temporary housing.

About \$1.4 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Continuum of Care grants program will be used to support the county's Housing First program. It is expected to begin next summer. The remainder of the grant, about \$1.1 million, will go to established shelter programs.

The new program is based on a voucher system that will result in the homeless being placed in their own apartments. It is expected that those accepted into the program will, over time, become productive contributors to society. National studies have shown that when permanent and supportive housing is made available to the chronically homeless, it can reduce emergency room visits and detoxification center admissions.

A report issued by Point in Time found that the Housing First project is cost effective. A hotel room for a homeless person costs \$75 a night or \$2,250 a month, while a shelter bed costs \$30 each night or \$930 a month. Meanwhile, a fair-market, one-bedroom rental unit in Passaic County costs \$1,037 monthly.

Some homeless shelter operators fear the new initiative will sap funds from their programs and dole out resources to people who are not responsible enough to use them wisely.

However, Richard Brown, the executive director of Monarch Housing Associates and a consultant on the homeless, says he believes the Housing First plan offers incentives to the homeless to change their lives. In Passaic County, officials say they will have a case manager monitoring the participants.

In addition, to Housing First the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs awarded \$799,140 for the Paterson YMCA to help fund the Shelter Plus Care Program. The Hispanic Multi-Purposed Service Center was given \$69,976 for the Single Women In Transitional and Comprehensive Housing. St. Philip's Ministry of Paterson has been allocated \$80,989 for supportive housing units and Strengthen Our Sisters, a battered women's program, was awarded \$197,916 for permanent housing.

It appears that the Housing First model is a long term and cost efficient plan, as opposed to the traditional option of placing the homeless in temporary shelters with little privacy and the threat of crime.

Housing First seeks to help homeless people trade instability and homelessness for stable, productive and self-sufficient lives. The \$2.5 federal grant should play a major role in helping some of the area's most vulnerable people reach that laudable goal.